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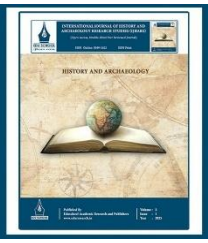

Maritime Silk Road Ceramics And Indian Ocean Networks, 200-1400 CE

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Abstract

This article reconstructs the maritime trade networks of the Indian Ocean between 200 BCE and 1400 CE through the ceramic evidence recovered from Southeast Asian port cities, shipwrecks, and burial sites. Drawing on archaeological assemblages spanning Indian Rouletted Ware, Tang-dynasty Changsha bowls from the Belitung shipwreck (c. 826 CE), Song-Yuan celadons and blue-and-white porcelains, and locally produced Thai and Vietnamese trade wares, the study traces the evolving structure of maritime exchange shaped by the monsoon wind system. The analysis challenges the conventional model of a unidirectional flow from advanced Chinese and Indian producers to passive Southeast Asian consumers. Instead, the ceramic record reveals that Southeast Asian entrepôts—Srivijayan ports, Philippine chieftaincies, and Javanese coastal polities—functioned as active agents in shaping demand, mediating redistribution, and assigning new cultural and political meanings to imported objects. The Belitung wreck demonstrates the industrial scale of ninth-century Chinese ceramic exports, while Philippine elite burial assemblages reveal the political instrumentalization of trade goods in competitive prestige economies. The article argues that no single maritime power dominated the Indian Ocean trade; rather, a shifting constellation of overlapping regional circuits, sustained by monsoon navigation, diverse shipbuilding traditions, and the complementary resources of ecologically distinct littoral societies, constituted an interconnected world economy in which Southeast Asian port cities were as essential as the kilns that supplied them.

Keywords: - Indian Ocean Trade, Maritime Silk Road, Southeast Asian Port Cities, Monsoon Navigation, Rouletted Ware

Introduction

For over a millennium, the Indian Ocean sustained the most active and geographically extensive system of maritime trade in the pre-modern world. Merchants from the Roman Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and China exchanged goods across distances of thousands of kilometers, driven by the seasonal rhythm of the monsoon winds. Among all the commodities traded spices, textiles, metals, aromatics ceramics have left the most durable and diagnostic trace in the archaeological record. Fired clay survives where silk rots, where spices are consumed, and where metals are reforged. A Chinese celadon bowl recovered from a burial in the Philippines or a sherd of Indian Rouletted Ware found at Bali can be traced to its kiln of origin with reasonable precision, providing hard evidence for the direction, scale, and chronology of maritime exchange.

The term “Maritime Silk Road” has become standard shorthand for these networks, but the singular noun is misleading. There was no single route and no unified commercial system. What existed was a shifting assemblage of overlapping regional circuits connecting the Persian Gulf to western India, the Malabar coast to Sri

Lanka and the Malay Peninsula, the Straits of Malacca to the South China Sea each with its own participants, commodities, and institutional structures. Chaudhuri's foundational study (1985, 34–40) described the Indian Ocean as a "world economy" in which no single power exercised hegemonic control, and in which trade was sustained by the complementary resources of ecologically diverse littoral societies.

The Monsoon System and Maritime Infrastructure

The Indian Ocean's monsoon winds created the physical infrastructure of long-distance trade. The southwest monsoon, blowing from May through September, pushed vessels from East Africa and Arabia eastward to India and from India eastward to Southeast Asia. The northeast monsoon, blowing from November through March, reversed the pattern, carrying ships back westward. This seasonal alternation imposed a rhythm on maritime trade: a merchant departing the Persian Gulf in autumn could reach the Malay Peninsula by midwinter, conduct his business during the calm transition period, and return with the southwest monsoon the following summer. Round-trip voyages typically required a full year; longer itineraries required layovers of months at entrepot ports.

The vessels that carried this trade reflected the maritime traditions of their regions of origin. Arab and Persian dhows used lateen (triangular) sails that allowed close-hauled sailing against the wind an advantage in the variable winds of the Arabian Sea. Southeast Asian vessels, documented by Pierre-Yves Manguin's (1980, 268–272) extensive survey, used lashed-lug construction: planks were fastened to internal frames by fiber lashings passed through projecting lugs, producing a flexible hull well suited to the shallow, reef-strewn waters of the Malay Archipelago. Chinese junks, appearing in the Indian Ocean trade from the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) onward, introduced watertight bulkhead construction, iron nails, and the stern-mounted rudder technologies that increased carrying capacity and navigational control.

The diversity of vessel types at Southeast Asian port sites Arab dhows at Srivijayan harbors, Chinese junks at Philippine anchorages, local lashed-lug boats at riverine entrepots underscores a critical point: no single maritime power dominated the Indian Ocean trade. The sea lanes were shared, and the ports that flourished were those that could service vessels and merchants from multiple traditions.

Early Exchange Networks (200 BCE – 500 CE): Rouletted Ware and Indian Connections

The earliest well-documented ceramic evidence for Indian Ocean maritime trade comes from Indian Rouletted Ware a distinctive pottery type characterized by concentric bands of rouletted (wheel-stamped) decoration on the interior base. Rouletted Ware was produced at multiple sites in southern and eastern India, with Arikamedu (near modern Pondicherry) serving as both a production center and a major port. Vimala Begley's excavations at Arikamedu (Begley and De Puma 1991, 12–25) confirmed a substantial Roman trading presence at the site, including Italian-made Arretine ware, Roman glass, and amphorae material evidence for the direct Rome-India trade described in the Periplus Maris Erythraei, an anonymous Greek merchant's guide to Indian Ocean trade dating to the mid-first century CE.

Rouletted Ware has been recovered from sites in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Bali, and Java, establishing that Indian merchants or at least Indian goods reached Southeast Asia by the early centuries CE. The distribution tracks the coastlines and river systems rather than direct open-ocean crossings, suggesting a network of cabotage (coastal hop-scotching) rather than point-to-point transoceanic voyaging. George Coedès (1968, 36–45) famously described this period as one of "Indianization" the adoption of Indian religious, political, and cultural models by Southeast Asian elites. The ceramic evidence supports the existence of sustained commercial contact but is agnostic on the question of whether trade drove political Indianization or the reverse.

Hall (1985, 28–35) argued that the earliest Southeast Asian states Funan in the Mekong Delta, Champa on the Vietnamese coast, and the predecessor polities of Srivijaya on Sumatra emerged precisely at the nodes of the maritime trade network, and that control of trade was the primary mechanism of state formation. This thesis has been qualified by subsequent scholarship, but the correlation between port locations, ceramic assemblages, and early state formation remains striking across the region.

Tang-Song Chinese Ceramics and the Belitung Wreck

The single most dramatic archaeological discovery bearing on the Maritime Silk Road is the Belitung shipwreck, found in 1998 off the coast of Belitung Island, Indonesia. The vessel was an Arab or Indian dhow a sewn-plank hull without nails carrying a cargo of approximately 60,000 ceramic pieces, primarily Changsha bowls

from Hunan province and Yue greenware from Zhejiang. Gold and silver objects were also recovered. The wreck has been dated to approximately 826 CE, during the Tang dynasty, based on the ceramic typology and an inscribed Changsha bowl bearing a date corresponding to that year (Flecker 2001, 337–342).

The Belitung wreck transformed scholarly understanding of the scale and organization of early Chinese ceramic exports. Sixty thousand bowls is not a speculative cargo; it is industrial-scale production for export. The uniformity of the Changsha bowls mass-produced, decorated with standardized painted motifs, and sized for stacking in the ship's hold indicates that the kilns at Changsha were manufacturing specifically for the maritime trade market. John Guy (1986, 45–58) had earlier documented the relationship between Chinese kiln production and Southeast Asian demand, but the Belitung wreck provided physical proof of the scale that Guy's ceramic distributions had implied.

The fact that the vessel was an Arab dhow rather than a Chinese junk is equally significant. It confirms that Arab and Persian merchants were active in the China trade by the ninth century, sailing from the Persian Gulf to Chinese ports (Guangzhou was the principal destination) and carrying Chinese goods back westward through Southeast Asian waters. The Arab geographer Ibn Khurdadhbih, writing around 850 CE, described the sea route from Basra to Guangzhou in detail, listing the ports of call and the commodities available at each a literary complement to the Belitung wreck's material testimony.

During the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), the scale and diversity of Chinese ceramic exports increased dramatically. The celadons of the Longquan kilns in Zhejiang, the qingbai (bluish-white) wares of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi, and the blue-and-white porcelains of the Yuan and Ming periods successively dominated the export market. Miksic (2013, 112–128) has documented the distribution of these wares across Southeast Asian sites, showing that demand shifted over time from green-glazed celadons to blue-and-white porcelain, reflecting changing aesthetic preferences among Southeast Asian consumers.

Southeast Asian Port Cities as Consumption and Redistribution Nodes

Southeast Asian port cities were not passive endpoints for Chinese ceramics. They were active markets where imported goods were consumed, redistributed, and assigned new cultural meanings. The ceramic assemblages at sites across the region demonstrate this clearly.

At Palembang and Muara Jambi on Sumatra associated with the Srivijayan polity that dominated the Straits of Malacca from the seventh through the thirteenth centuries Chinese ceramics appear alongside Middle Eastern glass, Indian beads, and locally produced earthenwares. The pattern suggests that Srivijaya functioned as an entrepot: goods arriving from China were not consumed locally in their entirety but warehoused and re-exported to destinations across the Indian Ocean. Philippe Beaujard (2019, vol. 2, 156–168) has argued that Srivijaya's commercial power rested precisely on this intermediary function its geographic position at the maritime crossroads between the Chinese and Indian Ocean trading systems.

In the Philippines, Laura Junker (1999, 210–235) has documented a strikingly different pattern of ceramic consumption. Chinese trade ceramics celadons, blue-and-white jars, stoneware storage vessels appear primarily in elite burial contexts and at chiefly residential sites rather than at market locations. Junker argues that imported ceramics served as prestige goods within a political economy organized around feasting, gift-giving, and competitive display. A Chinese celadon jar in a Philippine chieftain's burial was not merely a trade object; it was a marker of the chief's access to foreign exchange networks and, by extension, of his political authority.

At Trowulan in eastern Java the probable capital of the Majapahit kingdom (1293–1527 CE) the ceramic assemblage includes Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese wares in quantities suggesting both elite consumption and broader market distribution. The co-presence of ceramics from multiple Asian production centers indicates that Majapahit participated in diversified trade networks rather than depending on a single supply source. The Thai and Vietnamese ceramics at Trowulan are particularly significant because they demonstrate that China was not the only producer serving the Southeast Asian market Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, and Vietnamese kilns at Chu Dau competed for market share, especially during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the Ming dynasty periodically restricted maritime trade.

Islamic Commercial Networks and the 10th-14th Century Expansion

The rise of Muslim trading communities in Southeast Asia from the tenth century onward added a new

layer to the existing Indian Ocean exchange system. Hadhrami merchants from southern Yemen, Gujarati traders from western India, and Tamil Muslim groups established themselves at port cities across the Malay Archipelago, bringing not only goods but also religious and legal institutions. The conversion of coastal trading polities to Islam Pasai in northern Sumatra by the late thirteenth century, Malacca by the early fifteenth, Brunei and the Sulu

Sultanate by the late fifteenth followed the pathways of maritime commerce rather than military conquest (Chaudhuri 1985, 152–160).

The ceramic evidence reflects this commercial transformation. At sites associated with Islamic trading communities, Chinese ceramics with explicitly Islamic decorative programs appear: bowls with Arabic calligraphic inscriptions, plates with geometricized floral patterns conforming to Islamic aesthetic preferences, and forms designed for Islamic dining practices (large communal serving dishes rather than individual bowls). The Jingdezhen kilns produced these forms specifically for the Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Muslim markets, demonstrating a remarkable responsiveness to consumer demand across cultural boundaries.

The integration of the Indian Ocean system is visible not only in the ceramic distributions but in the port cities themselves. Quanzhou in Fujian province, the great Chinese maritime port of the Song and Yuan periods, housed communities of Arab, Persian, Indian, and Southeast Asian merchants, along with mosques, Hindu temples, and Nestorian Christian churches. Kilwa, on the East African coast, received Chinese ceramics that had passed through the same networks. Beaujard (2019, vol. 2, 210–225) has described this as a "world-system" in which the Indian Ocean connected production zones in China with consumption zones stretching from East Africa to Japan.

Conclusion

The ceramic record across Southeast Asian port cities tells a story that resists simplification. There was no single Maritime Silk Road but a shifting constellation of overlapping exchange networks, each adapted to the monsoon system's seasonal rhythms and shaped by the political economies of the states that controlled the coastlines and straits. Chinese ceramics dominated the long-distance trade by volume, but Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, and Middle Eastern goods circulated through the same channels, and Southeast Asian communities were active agents in shaping demand, determining distribution, and assigning meaning to imported objects.

The Belitung wreck reveals the scale of ninth-century trade; the burial assemblages of Philippine chieftains reveal the political uses to which trade goods were put; the entrepot warehouses of Srivijaya reveal the commercial logic of intermediary exchange. Each site offers a different angle on the same system or, more precisely, on the interconnected set of systems that constituted the Indian Ocean world economy between the second and fourteenth centuries.

What the ceramic evidence makes clear above all is that this was not a one-directional flow from advanced producers to underdeveloped consumers. Southeast Asian port cities were as essential to the system as the Chinese kilns that supplied them. Without the demand of Srivijayan, Javanese, and Philippine elites, without the intermediary services of Malay and Arab merchants, and without the monsoon winds that linked them all, the kilns of Changsha and Jingdezhen would have had no reason to produce for export at all.

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